

The bumpy road of Gospel progress

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[0 : 0 0] don't you wish sometimes that you just want to get from A to B, just like that, with a snap of a figure, twinkle of an eye? Like perhaps traveling to a holiday destination with three kids under the age of six in tall.

Are we there yet, Daddy? When are we going to get there? Or perhaps it's a bit more serious, you're doing a mercy dash to another state to see someone who is critically ill.

Of course, it's not just literal journeys, but metaphoric ones as well. For example, some of you pregnant mums out there, I'm sure there are days when you wish you'd gone straight from conception to delivery without passing labor.

And the reason is that journeys can be hard, can't they? They can be bumpy. There are hazards, there are roadblocks, and sometimes there are risks that the journeys might fail altogether.

And that's what we find today in our passage in Acts. If only the early church didn't have to go through all these things. Last week, I think you saw Acts chapter 5, verse 12 to 16, where we saw phenomenal growth in the church.

[1 : 1 3] The apostles were performing signs and wonders. People were coming to faith. People were being healed. How wonderful is that? And if you look later on in chapter 6, verse 7, that's the same thing again.

We read that the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. And yet, right in the middle, we have these two incidents.

The apostles being arrested and flogged, and then afterwards, some internal conflict between the Hebraic and Hellenic Jews. So what are we to make of these events?

How do they fit into God's gospel plan? Are they a detour? Are we better off without these disruptions? Well, let's look at the stories to understand that a bit better.

So my first point then is that we see that there is gospel progress in the face of external opposition. So we read in verse 17, the high priest arrested the apostles out of jealousy.

[2 : 1 6] They were put in jail, but God miraculously releases them by way of an angel. And then the next day, they begin preaching again at the temple. Well, the high priest tracks them down and brings them back to the Sanhedrin.

And so we pick up the action here in verse 27. The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest.

We gave you strict orders not to teach in his name, he said. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood. So they were not just motivated by jealousy.

Now they are offended as well by the accusation that they had blood on their hands. Peter knew what risks he was taking by saying this, and yet they had rather obey God rather than man.

And in particular, I think Peter was remembering Jesus' commission in Acts 1.8, which I'm sure you've looked at a few weeks back, where it says, you will receive power, Jesus said, when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem.

[3 : 49] And I've got that on the slide as well. In all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Peter picks up this idea, isn't it?

Two ideas of them being witnesses and then doing it by the Spirit's power when he says in verse 32, we are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.

It's amazing and fantastic, isn't it? Peter doesn't quite give up the opportunity, even in the midst of persecution, to present the gospel. He declares that God raised Jesus from the dead and there is forgiveness of sin and salvation for those who repent.

Just about the only thing he doesn't do is invite people to come forward in an altar call, doesn't he? But the religious elite, I mean, they should have known.

They were waiting for the Messiah. They should have embraced this message and yet, because they were blinded by pride, what they do instead is try to kill them. This is exactly what they did to Jesus, wasn't it?

[5 : 00] Verse 33, when they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. Well, we saw earlier that the Lord intervened miraculously by sending an angel.

Well, now the Lord intervenes again but in the person of a Pharisee, a Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was honored by all the people. He stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while.

Then he addressed the Sanhedrin, men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these people. Some time ago, Therese appeared, claimed to be somebody, and about 400 men rallied to him.

He was killed. All his followers were dispersed. And it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt.

He too was killed and all his followers were scattered. Can you see the point he's making? If this is purely human, yes, someone might come along.

[6 : 04] He might be popular for a while. He might raise a band. But once he's killed, the followers disperse. So verse 38, he says to them, Leave these men alone.

Let them go. For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men. You will only find yourselves fighting against God.

It's pretty compelling logic, isn't it? So much so that even the high priests who were bent on killing the apostles were persuaded. They still decided to flog them anyway, just for good measure, and to threaten them not to speak the name of Jesus.

But it's clear, isn't it, through both these interventions that God's hand is over the entire incident. As Gamaliel says, if God is in it, there is nothing they can do to stop him.

And that's always the way with God's word and with gospel progress. Even in the face of opposition, God's word is unstoppable.

[7 : 15] That illustration that Michelle did was apt. We didn't plan it, actually. It was just perfect. But can you see that die could not be stopped, right? No matter how much opposition you try. In fact, the more you stir, the quicker it spreads, doesn't it?

And it's the same with God's word. In our Old Testament reading today, which I've got on the slide again, it says, As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth.

It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Just think about it. You know, it just amazes me that that very drop of water that was in the sky falls to the ground, into the soil, and may run into the river, run to the ocean, and then finally evaporates back into the sky.

That drop of water, that molecule of H₂O, it remains the same, doesn't it, from start to end. And yet, what happens along the way?

The entire landscape is transformed by it. Plants grow, trees grow, there is fruit, there is harvest, because of that water. And friends, that is the same thing that happens with God's unstoppable word.

[8 : 43] His unchanging word, which changes everything, just like it does in Acts. Lives are changed. No one is left untouched by the gospel. And mind you, not even those who reject it.

Because we might think, you know, when we share the word and nobody believes, we think, oh, that's all waste, isn't it? Well, no, it's not. Because God's word has still done its purpose.

Because the person has heard, just as the high priest and the syncretists have, and come the day of judgment, they will be called to account for what they heard. And so, Peter's preaching has achieved God's purpose.

They will have no excuse on that day. And I think that's why, instead of fear and disappointment, the apostles could rejoice. Now, of course, they would love for everyone to believe.

But for them, that was not the main point, was it? Their main task was to make sure that the name of Jesus was proclaimed. And so, we have in verse 41, what I find, I think, are the most heartwarming words of this passage.

[9 : 53] The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing. Why? Because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name. Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

I wonder, have you ever asked yourself, how would you feel if you have to suffer for the name of Jesus? Do you feel joy?

Would you count it an honor to be asked to suffer for Jesus? Because that's what it meant to the apostles. This name, this name of Jesus meant so much to them that their own name by comparison, they were willing to be put to shame for it.

That's how much they loved Jesus' name. Their own safety and well-being was nothing if Jesus' name was going to be exalted. Because they knew deep down how much the Lord had done for them.

And yet, at the same time, I read it and, you know, I just go, there's such a profound sense of humility from them because they go, you know what, we're actually not worthy to suffer even for Jesus' name. You know, who are we that we should be associated with this exalted name?

[11 : 13] And so, when they suffer, they say, wow, we're counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the name. They think, oh no, Lord, not, they don't think, Lord, not us.

No, they think, Lord, what an honor. That's their attitude. I don't know if you've been reading on the internet, but there are stories coming out from Iran at the moment that the Christians in that country are being persecuted.

Christians and particularly Christian women. And yet, we hear stories of how they are fearless to share the gospel. Of course, they can't do it in the public, you know, open preaching, so what they do is they preach one-to-one, perhaps in the market as they're meeting people and all that.

But every time they do that, they run the real risk, don't they, that the person they're talking to is actually an informer for the government. And so, there's testimonies that come out that couples would talk to each other and the wife would leave home on the understanding that perhaps she may not return if she's caught.

And yet, they say they're not afraid. They do it with joy. They do not count their lives of more value than their saviour. And in fact, a bit like that bowl, the greater the persecution, they're saying, the more they see people coming to faith because it puts the moral bankruptcy of the regime and their religion in stark contrast with the gospel.

[12 : 49] People see this can't be the truth, this has got to be the truth. Now, we don't suffer the same threats here, but let me ask, if we lost our respectability because of the fact that we're Christians, you know, maybe in professional circles or social circles, we get excluded because we're Christians, we don't get invited to do certain things, we don't get the promotions, does that thought horrify us or will it fill us with joy?

If people discover that we still adhere to the so-called bigoted views of the Bible and ridicule us for it as they do in the media, how would we feel about that?

Would we say that it is okay? That we've been counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus? Friends, I hope that, you know, we're not discouraged because yes, it's probably getting harder and harder to become a Christian and to remain a Christian in Australia, but let's rejoice anyway because that means God's gospel is spreading.

We have a chance to keep proclaiming the word so that it will spread. Well, we've seen how the road of the gospel progresses through external opposition but now we see in chapter 6 that it can be bumpy because of internal conflict.

So in verse 1, let me read, we didn't read it just now, in those days when the number of disciples were increasing, the Hellenic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

[14 : 31] I can always identify with this because if you're a Chinese in Australia, you get this, right? There are ABCs, Australian-born Chinese, that cannot speak any Mandarin and then there are the new migrants that are Chinese who speak Mandarin that don't speak a lot of English and we have both of them here at Holy Trinity and often it's hard to communicate, isn't it?

because of that language and cultural barrier. And so this was a similar thing that was happening. They were both Jews but the language and culture was different and so the widows of the Hellenic Jews were being overlooked.

Well, in verse 2, this is how the church decided to resolve it. The twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibly over to them and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

So the apostles knew that they had a dilemma that they had to solve that on the one hand it was important to keep preaching the Word and praying because that's how the Gospel continues to spread and yet at the same time they knew that it was also important to look after the widows.

[15 : 50] Not because that, you know, this is just a problem that needs to be solved but no, that it was actually an expression of the Gospel. They were all united in Christ now and it was not right to be neglecting some within that body.

And so, what they do is to appoint a group and verse 5, they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Procorus, Nicon, Timon, Parmenas and Nicholas from Antioch and a convert to Judaism.

They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. These are, I think, mainly Hellenic Jews and even one a Gentile probably but the apostles prayed and laid hands on them which means to say that actually this work is not second-rate work that's somehow less important than what the apostles were doing.

Rather, what they did complemented and allowed the apostles to continue to preach and to pray. And the result is what I read before in verse 7, the word of God spread and many more came to know the Lord.

I think what it's saying there is that that's not going to be actually, that wouldn't have been possible if Stephen and the others didn't do that work. Now here in our church, actually, our vision statement has a very similar approach.

[17 : 14] so the headline of our vision which is at the bottom of the screen is to go, gather, and grow in Christ. But how are we to do it? Well, by prayerfully proclaiming and promoting God's word in love.

Proclaiming is to preach and teach the gospel. Promoting, on the other hand, is to do whatever is required to enable that proclaiming to happen. And so the promoting bit requires godly and wise people as well.

People with the patience to look after the kids so that mom and dad can come back into church to hear the word of God. Some in the nine o'clock, for example, have dedicated each Wednesday to picking up some of the older folk in the parish to bring them along to Wednesday at two so that they can keep hearing and being encouraged by God's word.

Or it's members showing hospitality to welcome new families so that they can then connect, start to belong, go to Bible study, and then keep hearing God's word.

All these are great ways of promoting the gospel and there are more. And they are done because they are a clear expression of the gospel. Now just like in Acts, these things often come with growing pains.

[18 : 31] So for example, I know that when we started the partnership, that meant changes here at 1030. I stole some of your best musicians. Stole, that's not the right word, yeah, but you had to rebuild, didn't you?

And you've done that. Life would have been much easier if we'd said, look, let's not worry, we're good here, right? Aren't we good here? Yeah, church is going well, let's just keep things as they are.

But no, we decided we're willing to work with these bumps along the road for the sake of gospel progress. And now down at Blackburn, there are more opportunities as well to do gospel work.

And again, it will be bumpy because as a smaller congregation, we have to sort of, in one sense, work a bit harder. Now, we can sit back quite easily at Blackburn, I think.

We're sort of a viable congregation, so we could just be a happy family. But that's not really doing what God wants us to do, is it? Because God wants us to be out there proclaiming God's word.

[19 : 37] Promoting it, using all the gifts we have, so that people can come to know the Lord, so that the kingdom of God can grow. Gospel progress doesn't mean everything would be smooth sailing, would it?

In fact, there would be bumps along the way. Sometimes that's from external opposition. Calling people to humble themselves and come to faith, not everyone's going to take that lying down, are they?

often they would resist. Other times, when people do come to faith and come into the church, then proclaiming God's word will bring growing pains.

But then, we have to try and disciple and grow them in Christ. That will take time, that will take understanding, that would mean accommodating, especially if people that come to church are different from us.

We need to actually change how we do church in order to welcome them and show that we care for them. But we do all these things so that God's word will continue to be spread.

[20 : 49] God's spirit will use all of this to grow God's kingdom in and through the bumps. And like a huge flood of water, nothing can stand in God's way.

And I think as Christians, we simply need to go along for the ride. Jump in the boat and enjoy the bumpy ride, as it were. I'm going to finish with a little slide of one of the water rides at SeaWorld.

Some of us love going on that, don't we? Well, let me invite you to jump on the water ride that is gospel progress. It will be bumpy.

we'll get our heart racing at times. You'll definitely get wet. But we are in a secure boat, and that is Christ. And in him, God will take us safely back, or safely to our journey's end.

Let's pray. Father, thank you that ever since Pentecost, your gospel has progressed according to your will and by the power of your spirit. thank you that through hardship and persecution, those who came before us have passed the gospel on to us, so that we are saved and have forgiveness of sins.

[22 : 10] Help us not to think that suffering for the gospel stopped with them, but to take up the baton and to endure hardship so that others may know Christ.

Give us joy to be comfort worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. Grow your church along this bumpy road of gospel progress.

We pray this for the sake of Jesus' name. Amen.